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ABSTRACT

The first objective of the study, conducted with 150 three-, four-, and five-year-olds, was to ascertain whether young children assign occupational and social roles by sex. The results obtained through the use of two newly devised instruments were positive. Children do assign social and occupational roles by sex. The second objective was to determine if these role assignments could be modified. An experimental curriculum was devised for half of the sample, the other half forming the control group. The results indicate that children's assignment of social and occupational roles can become more egalitarian, hence are modifiable. (Author)

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"An Experimental Curriculum Designed to Modify Children's
Sex Role Perceptions and Aspiration Levels."

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In the 1940's Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote a song about racism and how one is educated into racist notions:

"You've got to be taught
Before it's too late
Before you are six or seven or eight."

Representative Shirley Chisolm in 1971 indicated how appropriate this song is in describing how the young are educated into sexist notions.

This paper in addressing itself to the role schools play in this early indoctrination of the young into sexist perceptions, reports on one study which attempted to define a more egalitarian direction for the schooling of the very young--before six or seven or eight the Preschool Years.

As dissatisfaction with present sex role typing becomes more widespread, the schools, as agents of socialization, are coming under increasing attack. Voluminous documentation exists to substantiate the charge that boys and girls emerge from present day co-educational schooling with dramatically different perceptions of the roles they may appropriately play in home and society. (See Bibliography) One recent study which clearly documents this charge is the Greenberg study (1971) reported at the ALRA convention last year. Her study of 1800, 4th, 5th, 6th, 8th, and 10th grade boys and girls enrolled in public and private schools on Long Island, New York, contained significant findings which clearly demonstrated the differential perceptions and attitudes of boys and girls toward increased participation of women in social, economic and political spheres. Her study which utilized a 20 item questionnaire attempted to determine if there were systematic and significant group differences to the questions posed, and if these differences were a function of grade, age, socio-economic status, and/or sex. The results indicated that except for slight increments in egalitarian responses as children got older, differences in response were more likely to be related to the sex of the respondent than to socio-economic status or grade in school. The finding that socio-economic status did not influence response was significant since there appears to exist a widespread notion that interest in a changed role for women is confined to high rather than low economic status groups. This study indicates that this notion may be untrue. In analyzing the responses to the twenty items of the Greenberg questionnaire used in her study it was apparent that the major differences in response pattern were due to the sex of the respondent. Interestingly, differences in response were not confined to questions of preference and attitude alone. Questions which tapped the respondent's ability to analyze objective reality such as: "Are women as intelligent as men" were responded to in the same pattern as those that were clearly tapping preference, i.e. "Would you mind working for a female boss?" To both kinds of questions females said "Yes" more frequently than males. However despite significant differences between male and female respondents, both male and females by

fourth grade had incorporated stereotypic societal notions of the sex appropriateness of selected jobs, occupations and professions. Although girls consistently reported a greater preference and willingness for women to participate more fully in social, economic and political roles, from 4th grade on, the girls as well as the boys, held narrow and negative views concerning the role of women.

The results of the Greenberg study led us to speculate as to whether children have incorporated societal notions of appropriate sex role behavior considerably before their entrance into fourth grade. We further speculated as to whether or not these attitudes might be modifiable in the school setting if intervention took place at an early age. A unique combination of circumstances enabled us to explore both these avenues of interest: 1. The age at which children incorporate societal notions of appropriate occupational sex role assignment and 2. The possibility of modifying these notions through curricula intervention. In May of 1971 we were provided with the opportunity of working with the teachers and the children at the Hofstra Child Development Center for the school year 1971-1972. It was at this time that we formulated plans for assessing childrens attitudes and for developing curriculum modification techniques. We developed an assessment component in an attempt to gather all the necessary data (within rather limited financial and administrative parameters) for the exploration of our two fold aim.

As anticipated the bench mark data we gathered did indeed indicate that by three years of age children had incorporated stereotypic societal notions of appropriate occupational sex role assignment. Additionally, our early meetings with the nursery school teachers indicated that they too held stereotypic and narrow views of appropriate sex role behavior. Thus it became clear that time and effort would have to be expended for the exploration of teacher attitudes and behaviors, if our plan to modify the children's attitudes and behaviors was to have any chance of success. Consequently, the need for a curriculum for the teachers as well as the children was established.

Teacher's Curriculum

A schedule of two hour bi-monthly meetings was established. The early meetings assumed the following format.

- 1) Statistical and descriptive materials which document the effects of stereotypic sex role expectations and assignments on both the individual and society were distributed.

- 2) Discussion, analysis and interpretation of these materials followed.

- 3) The role schools play in forming these stereotypic sex role expectations and assignments was discussed, analyzed and interpreted.

As the project evolved the later meetings changed in focus. From general discussions of sexism in society and schools the focus shifted to more specific concerns.

- 1) Teacher's individual patterns of differential behavior towards boys and girls were described, analyzed and interpreted.

- 2) New materials and methods for use with the children were disseminated, analyzed and revised.

- 3) Feedback discussions on the positive and negative aspects of the ongoing curriculum took place.

While much of the curriculum implemented with the teachers focused directly on the problems arising from societal, school, individual and sexist practices a similar focus was not judged desirable for the children's curriculum. In dealing with the teachers we attempted to make them more conscious of their own and others sexist's beliefs and practices. The surfacing of the children's sexist's notions although necessary to our assessment component was not a planned part of their curriculum.

Children's Curriculum

While the teacher's curriculum might be described as remedial in nature and narrow in focus, the children's curriculum had to be more broadly conceived. Their curriculum, without neglecting those areas of learning typically associated with the preschool experience had to be focused on a broadened view of individual potential and societal opportunity. In planning the children's curriculum several criteria had to be met.

- 1) A balance between cognitive and affective dimensions had to exist.

- 2) All curriculum areas had to be represented.

- 3) Autonomous, independent and assertive behaviors had to be elicited and reenforced.

- 4) Opportunities for individual development and group interactions had to be provided.

- 5) Egalitarian attitudes of boys and girls had to be promoted.

Our observations and deliberations led us to the formulation of our BASIC HUMAN NEEDS CURRICULUM. This curriculum which has as its core social studies concepts, focuses the pre-school learner on the timeless basic needs all humans share regardless of sex, race or class. Egalitarian in its affective thrust, the curriculum seeks to focus on the commonality of human needs while helping to engender in the young child a knowledge

of, and a respect for the professions, crafts and vocations which are organized to help satisfy basic human needs. Helping each child to aspire to full, future participation in the adult world or work and leisure was one of our major goals.

Having chosen a social studies based curriculum which focused on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes through concept attainment, we then integrated other curriculum areas; language arts, number work, science, reading and writing experiences and creative and interpretive arts.

The Basic Human Needs Curriculum seeks to effect change through the models, media and messages schools provide. School models refer to the adults school's employ or in other ways integrate into the school life of the children. These models demonstrate, by example, the jobs, occupations and professions adult females and males pursue. School media refers to all the soft-ware provided by the school which communicate through words, pictures and activities the appropriateness of specific sex role behavior. Lastly, school messages refers to verbal transactions between adults and childrens within the school setting which either transmit sexist notions or heighten artificial sexual differences.

The Basic Human Needs Curriculum, as we designed it, has six components: food, clothing, shelter, love and affection, health and recreation and the culminating component-the community. The direction which each component takes is toward the occupation or profession which expresses society's means of satisfying these basic human needs.

Our decision to implement a curriculum with a unifying direction was a change in orientation for the child development center. Typically the day at the school had been divided into outdoor-indoor play, rest, snack and activity periods, and free and structured play sessions. Although special projects were carried out throughout the year usually in conjunction with a religious or secular holiday or festival generally no overriding theme dominated the selection of activities and materials. The implementation of this curriculum provided an extended central theme around which activities and materials were integrated. Another departure from previous practise was the large scale purchase of consumable materials.

A curriculum outline and materials were provided each teacher at the inception of each unit. These materials consisted of:

- 1) Learning kits for concept attainment activities.
- 2) Materials for constructing appropriate work samples of the theme of each component.
- 3) Pictures of both men and women pursuing occupations associated with the basic human need being studied.
- 4) Uniforms and hats for occupational role playing activities.
- 5) Vocabulary lists.
- 6) Books and records.

Throughout the unit teachers took still and motion pictures of the children engaged in their role playing activities. Films and pictures were regularly shown to the children in order to enhance the children's perception of their developing capabilities, and to encourage and reinforce the development of independent, autonomous and assertive behaviors.

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Results

1. Our first discovery was that "free play" was not free at all. When given the opportunity to chose the activity they preferred, both boys and girls chose what they believed were appropriate activities for their sex. When, however, uniforms, hats, and encouragement were provided, both boys and girls participated equally and enthusiastically in curriculum activities previously shunned.
2. Both teachers and parents reported the children's enthusiastic participation and pleasure in activities provided. The parents were particularly pleased with the children's growth in independent behaviors observed at home.
3. The output of the children on each of the curriculum projects was surprisingly sophisticated, especially so since many of the activities involved complex social interaction and cooperation. Additionally, the children translated and extended prescribed curriculum activities into novel and creative dimensions.
4. Using two measures we developed for the assessment component of the study we found no change in the children's perception of present occupational sex role assignment, and a slight insignificant change in the children's perceptions of future occupational sex role assignment. Using the Caldwell Preschool Inventory we found significant increases in the children's abilities that are related to school achievement and success.

Epilogue

A very happy turn of fate coupled the completion of this curriculum experiment in the Spring of 1972 with announcements from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the New York State Department of Education that a committment to end school discrimination on the basis of sex was to become the educational policy of the future.

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